DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 459 777 IR 058 271

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TITLE	Integration of Information Services in the Parliament of Zimbabwe.
PUB DATE	2001-08-00
NOTE	6p.; In: Libraries and Librarians: Making a Difference in the Knowledge Age. Council and General Conference: Conference Programme and Proceedings (67th, Boston, MA, August 16-25, 2001); see IR 058 199.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.ifla.org.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Foreign Countries; Government Libraries; *Information Services; *Information Systems; *Organizational Development; Systems Development
IDENTIFIERS	*Organizational Structure; *Parliamentary Libraries; Zimbabwe

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the integration of information services in the Parliament of Zimbabwe (PoZ). An organizational chart of the information systems at PoZ in 1999 is provided, and each of the four departments managing information services are described, i.e., the library, the research department, public relations, and information technology. An organizational chart of the new integrated information service is then shown, consisting of the library, research department, and information technology all headed by the Director of Information Services. Several advantages of the integrated system coordinating services through one head are listed, including: transformation of the splintered efforts of the various units into a coherent whole; productive cooperation with other professional support services; improved administrative efficiency; improved acquisition process of the library; improved teamwork ethos; enhanced communication; and reduction of the hierarchical structure and unnecessary delays. (MES)

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ED 459 777

67th IFLA Council and General Conference August 16-25, 2001

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Joint Meeting with: -
Meeting Number: 103 (Panel 1)
Simultaneous Interpretation: -

Integration of Information Services in the Parliament of Zimbabwe

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Introduction

The underpinning philosophy of this paper is that information and information systems are the "*glue*" which hold an organisation together and that without this glue, the organisation will ultimately fall apart. Indeed, a recent statistic Laudon and Laudon (2000) indicates that of all companies/organisations that suffer a complete and irretrievable loss of information systems, 46% are bankrupt within six months.

Information systems have the capacity to support all levels of decision making within an organisation from operational through tactical (managerial) to strategic decision-making. It is the additional capacity to provide a competitive edge that has driven many organisations to make heavy investments both in information systems and the information technology to run them on. It was this realisation that drove Parliament of Zimbabwe (PoZ) to develop an information system that addressed the needs of the users – Members of Parliament and Civil Society Organisations.

Evolution of Information Systems at PoZ

Prior to 1999 the PoZ had four departments which were managing information delivery services namely:

- Research
- Library
- Public Relations
- Information Technology

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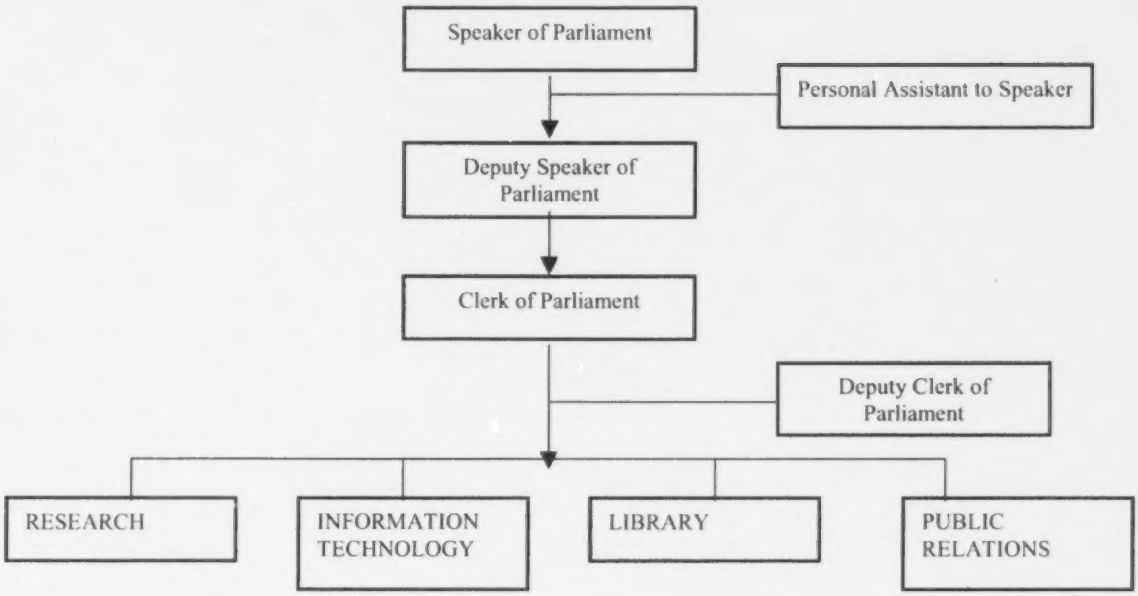
The diagram below shows the original position.



The Library

The Library operated as a depository public entity. This meant that it was not service-oriented. The result of this was that the other elements in the parliamentary support chain (research, analysis, parliamentary education, committee secretariats) had to build their own information resources and became dependant for information from government departments which Parliament is supposed to scrutinise to achieve accountability of public expenditure. The other consequence of this was that Members of Parliament and staff became frustrated with the lack of relevant parliamentary information services and thus lost confidence in the library.

The institution then made a decision with the assistance of consultants from United Kingdom, Australia and Canada to redefine the core business of the library as "*Provision of information for the research needs of Parliament.*" This led to a revision of the client base, relevant holdings and collections development and the management issues which flow from these. The bye-laws of the library have since been reviewed to refine the client base restricting it to Members, parliamentary committees, and parliamentary staff with others granted access only with specific approval of the Clerk.

An exercise carried out by a committee of leading librarians in Zimbabwe has since recommended a weeding exercise. The current collection of the Library of Zimbabwe does not focus on materials of contemporary parliamentary relevance but includes extensive holding on subjects such as history, voyages, languages, anthropology, religion, medicine etc. While it is conceivable that some aspects of these subjects may be of interest to Members of Parliament from time to time, such traditional monograph dominated materials are not the stuff of a working parliamentary collection. This situation arose out of the fact that there was no coordination between the Library and the end-users, MPs and Research staff.

Research Department

Because of the library's shortcomings as a parliamentary library and the lack of cooperation between the Library and the Research Service, too much time was taken by the research team on providing its own information base. Because of the limited capacity of the Public Relations department, research resources were also diverted to assist it in its various tasks. The result was a dilution of research resources and a frustration that primary clients' needs remained unmet. This affected the quality of debate in the House and led to a low opinion by Members of Parliament of the research facility.

With the assistance of consultants, the core business of the Research Department was identified as the provision of oral and written, value added research and analysis services to Members of Parliament and Committee Clerks. The department now provides:

- Immediate oral briefs;
- Oral briefings on notice;
- Bills digests;
- Memoranda or short notes in response to individual client requests;
- Individually tailored papers;
- General distribution papers for conferences and workshops.

In the last financial year 1 890 requests were received by the 4 staff of the Research Service.

Public Relations

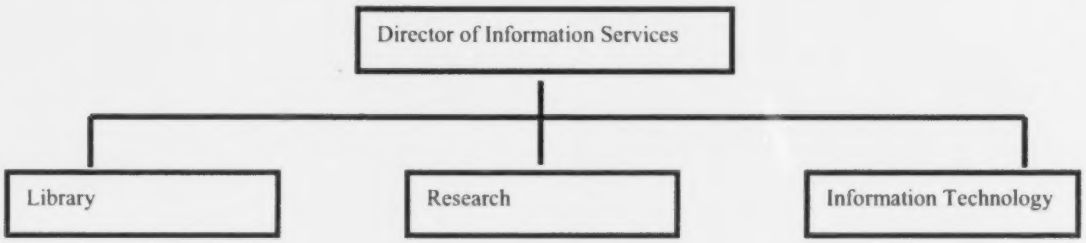
As with the Library and Research Services there was also dissatisfaction among Members of Parliament on the services provided by the Public Relations Department. The rationale for creating this department in the 1980s was to improve knowledge about Parliament in the community, assist people better understand the Parliament and thereby bridge the gap between PoZ and the community. However, this function was not properly carried out because of an unclear determination of core business, an unsatisfactory resource base, a reactive rather than an initiating approach to its business and lack of cooperation between staff in the Research and Information Departments. However, with the restructuring exercise carried out after the consultants, the core business of the information department was identified as provision of public education and relations. It now has a staff of six and its main functions are educating the public about the operations of PoZ. It is not part of the new team but reports directly to the Clerk of Parliament.

Information Technology

Prior to 1999, the Information Technology Department existed as a stand alone in the institution manned by one member of staff. The IT department did not have a clear understanding of its strategic role in improving information delivery services. It functioned more as an acquiring agency of software and hardware. However, as a result of the integration exercise, a strategic framework in which IT could operate was created. This was done on the realisation that the provision of information, research and parliamentary education services supported by appropriate information technology can make a significant contribution to the capacity of parliaments/legislature to play their proper role *vis-à-vis* the Executive and,

thereby, to make a contribution to the quality of democracy. This has been recognised in the current Parliamentary Reform Process in Zimbabwe.

The new integrated information delivery service in Zimbabwe is headed by a Director. The structure of the department is as shown below.



Advantages of an Integrated System coordinating services through one head

- Integration has transformed the splintered efforts of the various units into coherent whole;
- It has established productive cooperation with other professional support services ensuring that all the resources of the PoZ are deployed optimally in the interest of Members of Parliament;
- The process of integration has improved administrative efficiency (fewer levels of approval) reduced the burden on the Clerk and has ensured timely and targeted spending of funds;
- The integration process has improved the acquisition process of the Library, as the Library now purchases relevant books and periodicals. The Research department now has a direct role in the purchasing of library materials;
- It has improved teamwork ethos as the heads of the departments meet regularly to discuss work-in-hand and progress on specific issues etc;
- Communication has greatly been enhanced; and
- The devolution of power from the Clerk to the Director has reduced the hierarchical structure and unnecessary delays. Hierarchies are not only resource costly but may be counter-productive to optimal possibility of miscommunication with another link in the reporting or clearance chain.

Conclusion

The greatest achievement of integrating parliamentary information services in the PoZ has been the build up of a spirit of team dynamic. Effective service cannot be provided in pressured parliamentary

circumstances except by effective teamwork. No staff in the business of information delivery can afford to regard an urgent request as not their business; all staff need to assist each other to meet deadlines, e.g. by responding to requests for assistance in identifying best possible sources of information on a given requests. The amount of synergy that has resulted as a product of integration has increased efficiency and restored MPs' confidence in the information delivery system of Parliament. This is evidenced by the utilisation of the various components of the information delivery service. Furthermore, MPs seem to be clearer now on where to get what type of information. As a result of integration the value of Parliament as a watchdog for the public has been enhanced. Its responsiveness has been increased. In a way the integration has gone a long way towards assisting the Parliament of Zimbabwe achieve its constitutional mandate of making laws for the good governance of the nation.

Lesson Learnt

- Information should be regarded as a key resource;
- No corporate strategy is complete if there is no IS/IT strategy;
- IS/IT is too important to be left solely to IS/IT professionals; and
- Planning for IS/IT should be an important and integral part of any institution's competitive strategy development.